

Miami-Dade school district hires lobbyist — at \$108,000 a year — to take concerns to Congress, Trump

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The Miami-Dade school district will soon have representation in Washington, D.C. Estelle Doro AP

For the first time in nearly a decade, the Miami-Dade school district is hiring a lobbying firm to represent its interests in Washington, D.C.

At a meeting on Wednesday, the School Board approved a three-year contract — at \$108,000 a year — with Ballard Partners, a Florida lobbying firm, to advocate for the district's interests before Congress

and several federal agencies.

“We’ve always had a very active presence at the federal level, but in light of the new players in the administration we felt it was prudent to seek assistance in being able to have additional access,” said Iraida Mendez-Cartaya, who oversees the school district’s office of intergovernmental affairs. The district hopes to “nurture good working relationships with the federal administration to continue to be able to provide a quality education to the students in Miami-Dade.”

The School Board’s decision comes amid growing concern nationwide about proposed cuts to federal education funding.

President Donald Trump’s [proposed budget](#) for fiscal year 2018 calls for \$9.2 billion in cuts to the Department of Education, including slashing funds for teacher training and after-school programs.





The proposed budget cuts would “severely reduce” the amount of federal education funding Miami-Dade receives and are among the district’s top concerns, said Mendez-Cartaya. The School Board has also identified other key issues in its annual legislative agenda, which include supporting immigration relief for undocumented immigrants who were brought to the United States as children and monitoring the impacts of a [sweeping federal education law](#) known as ESSA. Although not included in the School Board’s federal legislative agenda, the district will also ask Ballard Partners to advocate for the extension of Temporary Protected Status for Haitian immigrants, which the School Board [voted to support](#) at its May meeting.

It's not unusual for a large school district to have a lobbyist at the federal level. The Broward County school district is represented by the firm Alcalde & Fay in Washington, D.C., and the Palm Beach County school district had a contract with a lobbying firm up until 2010.

"Given the direction that D.C. is headed, I think it's important that districts have representation up there to ensure that we're advocating for these programs that really help to enhance our students' education," said John Sullivan, the director of legislative affairs for the Broward school district.

Miami-Dade had a lobbyist at the federal level until around 2008 when the recession forced the district to make significant budget cuts, Mendez-Cartaya said.

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John Sullivan, the director of legislative affairs for the Broward school district

Ballard Partners president Brian Ballard is a longtime Tallahassee lobbyist whom the Tampa Bay Times earlier this month [called a "powerful political insider."](#) He represented the business interests of Donald Trump in Florida before the billionaire won the White House.

Ballard said that while his firm represents other school districts in the state Legislature, the contract is the firm's first with a school district for lobbying at the federal level. Ballard said the firm is charging Miami-Dade less than it charges private clients in an effort to give back to the community.

"We'll do our best to make sure that not only do we do it in a way that makes the citizens of Miami-Dade proud, but also that we make it cost effective," Ballard said.

Smaller school districts are less likely to have their own lobbyist in Washington, said Mike Griffith, the school finance strategist for the Education Commission of the States, an organization that tracks and studies education policy. Many smaller districts are represented through national groups, however, like the Council of the Great City Schools and the National School Boards Association.

While not all districts have hired a lobbyist, many have recently started paying closer attention to federal education policy, Griffith said. "They're watching it more and they're more concerned about it," he said.

Tom Gentzel, the executive director of the National School Boards Association, said that in addition to bringing school board concerns to the Department of Education, the association is in communication with a number of federal agencies, including the Federal Communications Commission and the Department of Agriculture, which oversees the national school lunch program.

"While there are specific needs that certain districts have, there's pretty broad agreement on major issues," Gentzel said. "Rural, urban, suburban — school boards I think are pretty strong about the need for local leadership in education. I think there's pretty broad support for the concept that the federal government needs to be helpful and supportive," without overreaching, he said.

U.S. Secretary of Education DeVos visits Royal Palm Elementary in Miami

U.S. Secretary of Education DeVos visited Royal Palm Elementary in Miami with Superintendent of Miami-Dade County Public Schools Alberto Carvalho on April 7, 2017.